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EAST CHOP LIGHTHOUSE

By Wayne Wheeler

The north side of Martha's Vineyard Island is notched by a large V-shaped bay forming a harbor for the town of Vineyard Haven (originally called Homes Hole). The harbor is guarded on the east and west sides by capes known as East and West Chop. Since the beginning of our country, both chops have witnessed the passing of thousands of vessels. Until the construction of the Cape Cod Canal in the 1940s, the primary route of vessels transiting from Portland, Maine, in the north to New York and points south was past these two chops.

In 1818 the federal government saw the necessity for a lighthouse on the West Chop bluff, but strangely enough, not on East Chop which was the turning point into Vineyard Haven Harbor for vessels arriving from the north.

In the early 1800s a telegraph station consisting of signal flags was erected on the East Chop to alert the merchants of Vineyard Haven of ships arriving at that port. It has been written that in 1850 a long distance telegraph system was installed on East Chop that signaled to a station on Cape Cod of ships heading west across Vineyard Sound enroute to Boston. The cape station relayed the news to stations farther north and eventually the information reached Boston. That signal flags could be seen on Cape Cod is doubtful.



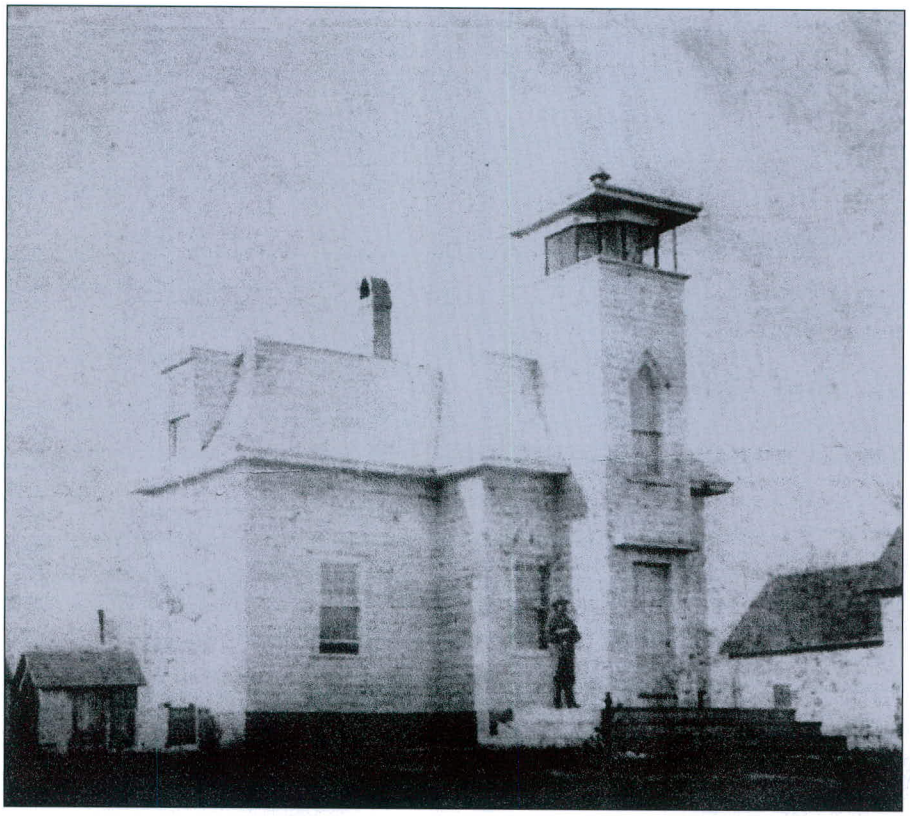
East Chop Lighthouse atop Telegraph Hill. USLHS archive photo.

In the early 1860s Captain Silas Daggett realized the need for a lighthouse on East Chop and petitioned the government to construct one. When the federal government did not take action, he constructed a private lighthouse funded by local merchants, various shipping interests, and marine insurance companies. The lighthouse was completed in 1869 and was described as "a circular wooden tower with a railed gallery around the lantern." Captain Grafton Luce served as the keeper. Two years later, in December 1871, the lighthouse burned to the ground. Apparently the keeper was cleaning a rug with kerosene when it accidentally caught fire.

Captain Daggett again secured funding from maritime interests to construct a new lighthouse that was completed in May 1872. The building incorporated the tower into the dwelling. The structure was described as a slight wooden building little better than a shanty. The optic consisted of three kerosene-fueled lamps backed by 21-inch diameter reflectors displaying a fixed red light. The range was listed as 14 miles, but it is doubtful a small reflector system can produce that range, plus the focal plane of the optic was about 50 feet, which only allows the light to be seen 8 miles due to the curvature of the earth.

Finally in 1873 the local lighthouse district realized that it would, indeed, be beneficial to have a federal lighthouse on East Chop. The *Annual Report* to Congress from the Lighthouse Board stated, "As there

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Print made from a stereopticon created by C. H. Shute & Son depicts the original lighthouse and attached keeper's house. USLHS archive photo.
Below left: The current summer house created from the original wooden structure. Photo by Wayne Wheeler.
Below right: Interior spiral staircase in the summer house. Photo by Wayne Wheeler.





is no doubt as to the utility of the light, it is recommended that an appropriation for erecting a small 4th order light be made." The request was made in the report each of the next two years until March 3, 1875, when $5,000 was appropriated to purchase the land and existing structure from Captain Daggett and to construct the station. The wooden structure was sold to a local resident, and a portion was incorporated into a summer vacation house. That structure stands today, situated on the East Chop bluff not far from the lighthouse.

The government erected a standard cast-iron structure similar to other cast-iron towers in the Northeast (Nauset Beach, Edgartown, Cape Neddick, etc). The tower was 40 feet high, placing the focal plane of the optic at 79 feet above sea level. A typical 1870-style, single-keeper dwelling was erected near the tower along with a small oil house. Both the tower and dwelling were painted white. A rotating fourth-order Fresnel lens was installed in the tower that provided a flashing red light. George Fisher was assigned as keeper. It is reported that he was provided with a house keeper named Mary Daley, but this is doubtful.

In 1880 the tower's color was changed to red. The red eventually oxidized, creating a reddish brown color that was maintained as brown when the tower was repainted.

In 1902 George W. Purdy became the keeper. He had lost his arm in an engine room accident aboard the Lighthouse Service tender *Azalea*. Perhaps he was awarded the keeper position as compensation. Local residents remembered him as keeping the light station in tip-top condition, everything always freshly painted, grass neatly mowed, and everything shined and clean. He prided himself on his rose garden. Once when scraping the tower, paint chips lodged in his eyes, causing him to lose sight in one eye.

In 1927 the lens was replaced, and in 1933 the lighthouse was automated and Purdy retired. The dwelling was torn down, and the color of the light changed from red to green (flashing every six seconds).

The government transferred the land of the station to the city of Oak Bluffs in 1957 for use as a park.

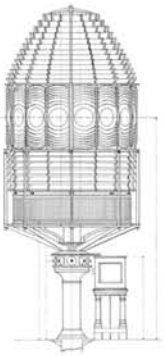
In 1986 the Coast Guard licensed the tower, along with the Gay Head and Edgartown lighthouses, to the Vineyard Environmental Research Institute (VERI) for a period of 35 years. VERI protects and maintains the lighthouses and conducts environmental research at the sites. In 1988 VERI repainted the tower white as the dark color absorbed the sun's rays, causing overheating of the interior and damaging the woodwork.

In 1993 the Vineyard Historical Society took over control of the three light stations and occasionally opens them to the public.

Of historical note is that a portion of the original private lighthouse that served until 1875 remains as part of a summer vacation house.

Some research provided by David Lewis.

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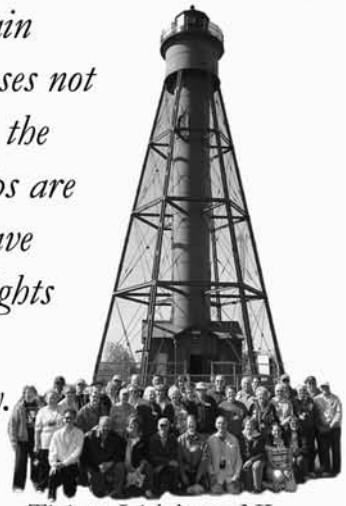
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